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ABSTRACT

Many school systems are facing mandated, systemic change, through the imposition of standards-based reform. Ontario (Canada) is no different than many other jurisdictions. Mandated, systemic change has impacted teaching and learning in Ontario classrooms. The issue of boys' underachievement in literacy appears to resurface whenever student achievement results emerge as a public issue. Gendered approaches to educational results, given the discourse, are not new but timely. This paper explores, through the use of focus groups, some of the attitudes and beliefs that boys hold toward reading and writing as they impact the high-stakes tests. The Durham District School Board has approximately 70,000 students in 125 schools. Although the district performs in the top 15% of districts in the provincial assessments, gendered results continue to exist. A study examined some of the attitudes of boys regarding issues involving reading and writing in classrooms and on the provincial tests. A series of semi-structured focus groups were conducted with boys in grades 4 and 6 in three schools in which boys performed well in literacy and three schools where boys underperformed compared to their female peers. Focus groups were limited to five volunteer students in each of the six schools for a total of 30 boys participating in the groups. All students, especially young males, wanted more choice in what they read in school--boys wanted more science fiction and high action books. So teacher-librarians began to gather high-interest reading resources for boys including informational text, magazines, science fiction, and action fiction. (Contains 44 references.) (NKA)

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Boys and Literacy: Why Boys? Which Boys? Why Now?

By Beverley Freedmon

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (84th, Chicago, IL, April 21-25, 2003).

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BOYS AND LITERACY: WHY BOYS? WHICH BOYS? WHY NOW?

PURPOSE:

"The timing of calls for greater accountability for schools and school systems has been remarkably similar across many countries" (Leithwood, Edge & Jantzi, 1999, p.9). Many school systems are facing mandated, systemic change, through the imposition of standards-based reform. Educators such as Elmore (2000) argue that students learn largely as a consequence of what goes on in classrooms and schools. Standards-based reform holds schools and school systems responsible as the unit for improving student achievement (Elmore, 2000; Lezotte, 2002). State-supported, high-stakes testing and published, school-by-school results are two outcomes of this emphasis on measuring student achievement for accountability (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 2000; Visscher, 1999). Ontario is no different than many other jurisdictions. Mandated, systemic change has impacted teaching and learning in Ontario classrooms. New, grade-by-grade rigorous curriculum, special education funding, teacher testing, provincial assessments, student-focussed funding, teacher testing and compulsory professional development for recertification are but a few examples. These changes have to be placed within the contexts of a global shift towards accountability and a resulting focus on improving student achievement (Sammons, 1999; Schmoker, 2001).

This research is grounded in a larger framework. Schools and school systems are bureaucratic structures that can influence/shape the responses from the various stakeholders that form part of the educational system. In the educational vernacular, school systems are 'tight' on outcomes and goals such as improving student achievement and 'loose' on how stakeholders within the system operationalize those goals (DuFour, 1999). In this way, school systems deal with collective responsibility and individual action. These competing agendas of control, centralization, accountability, coherency; and on the other side, site-based decision making, decentralization, diversity and destandardization, form part of the environments that schools and school systems operate within. These competing interests and agendas lead to competing policies, which set up tensions in which schools and school systems must operate. The messiness and complexity of the change process is now recognized (Blackmore & Kenway, 1995; Fullan, 2000).

Schools and school systems are impacted by external pressures, and the pervasive accountability agenda strongly impacts the internal working relationships of schools. It is within this 'tight and loose' dualism of competing agendas that principals and teachers negotiate their relationships. The minefields of high-stakes testing and distributed leadership create often-conflicting demands that result in tensions in how these demands are played out. Yet, as Murphy (2002) pointed out, "The core technology of teaching and learning is embedded or nested within multiple contexts including (but not limited to) the school, district, community, and state" (p.50). Any initiative must reach through these contexts to the classroom.

High-stakes testing has focused on the basics – literacy and numeracy, as foundational skills for future success. One of a myriad of concerns that has emerged from the high-stakes testing movement has been the realizations that in reading and writing, some boys are underachieving, compared to their female counterparts. In Ontario, Canada, given the newly-imposed diploma requirement of passing the provincial Grade 10 Literacy Test, the issue of the percentage of boys who fail, as compared to the smaller number of girls who fail, has become a concern. Marr (2002) describes the focus on assessments as high-stakes tests mirroring aspects of the American model.

Historically, work in the realm of gender differences in achievement has focused almost exclusively on girls. In the United States, 56% of university undergraduates are female and in Canada 60% (USA, 2002). Today, as we see girls closing the achievement gap, the focus has begun to shift to boys, particularly in the area of literacy. The Education Office Review (ERO) in New Zealand found in a study of 60 secondary schools that "girls outperform boys at school against most measures of achievement. The achievement of boys has, therefore, become a focus of considerable attention" (1999, p.2).

In Ontario, as elsewhere, the headlines again have deplored boys' results in reading and writing on provincial and national tests. Recent concerns in Ontario stem from the public release, district-by-district and school-by-school, of the provincial assessments. In 1997, in Ontario, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) was given the role of developing, implementing, and managing provincial assessments. In addition, EQAO is involved with national and international assessments. In grades three and six, Ontario students are tested on reading, writing and mathematics in normed, performance-based assessments. In grade nine, Ontario students are tested in mathematics, and in grade ten they are tested on literacy.

As a result of these provincial assessments, achievement in literacy again has become high stakes. According to Statistics Canada (2002), literacy accounts for 30% to 40% of the economic return from education. In the United States, "Reading is being emphasized in this country as never before. The Bush administration is rolling out its $5 billion Reading First initiative" (Coeyman, 2002, p.4).

The gendered results of boys in reading and writing can be seen in the achievement results of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). Statistics Canada noted "Students' sex, language, and socio-economic background were all significantly associated with student achievement on the tests" (Statistics Canada, 2002, p. 16). In 2002, on the Grade 10 test, 55% of boys passed reading and writing, compared to 70% of girls. In the Durham District School Board, 67% of boys and 79% of the girls passed both.

EQAO also reported a gendered differential in attitude towards reading and writing in elementary school. In Grade 3, 80% of girls and 72% of boys indicated that they like to read and the comparable data in Grade 6 is 68% of girls and 52% of boys. In Grade 3 writing, 69% of girls and only 54% of boys indicated that they liked to write. In Grade 6, 56% of girls and 38% of boys indicated that they like to write. The Canadian National

Longitudinal Study on Children and Youth (NLSCY) reported similar findings across the country, as did the international results from Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2000 where boys were over-represented at the lowest reading proficiency (EQAO, 2002).

The Canadian National Longitudinal Study on Children and Youth (NLSCY) reported similar findings across the country. Teachers rated girls' literacy skills higher than boys' in kindergarten (NLSCY, 2000). They reported that, in terms of verbal ability and impulse control, the average boy at age six is less ready for school than the average girl of the same age. This was confirmed in the Canadian Test for Basic Skills for reading and writing in both primary and elementary grades (Canadian Conference of Educators, 2000). In British Columbia, girls outperformed boys in grades four and eight in both reading and writing (BC Ministry of Education, 1998). In Alberta, for students aged sixteen, girls scored above boys in the reading and writing tests (NLSCY, 2000).

Australian Studies indicate that in each aspect of literacy – reading, writing, viewing, and speaking – the average girl outperforms the average boy (Queensland Government, 2002). In Queensland, boys are identified in traditional literacies as more at risk than girls (Queensland, 2002). In a paper for the Australian House of Representatives *Inquiry into the Education of Boys* (2000), the New South Wales Secondary Principals' Council believes that boys come to rely on "alternative and unbalanced models of masculinity, which abound in the media, peer and popular culture" (p.3). They felt that this view of society contributed to the way boys respond in schools and to their apparent lack of interest in reading and writing. Many teachers and staff, they said, have a limited understanding regarding "how their ideas about gender influence their decisions and behaviours as well as their expectations of and interactions with boys and girls" (p.20).

The issue of boys' underachievement in literacy appears to re-surface whenever student achievement results emerge as a public issue (Cohen, 1998). Gendered differences in test results require thoughtful responses from school boards. Gendered approaches to educational results, given the discourse, are not new but timely. This paper will explore, through the use of focus groups, some of the attitudes and beliefs that boys hold towards reading and writing as they impact the high-stakes tests.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Gender can be seen as a complex set of social, cultural and psychological phenomena attached to sex (Mellin, McCracken & Appleby, 1992). Gender operates within the larger societal framework of which school plays a part, and students enter school with innate abilities, prior experiences and parental expectations. Gender plays two critical roles. The first is the way boys and girls grow to understand, make sense of, and master specific areas of the formal curriculum (American Association of American Women, 1998). The second is the way that students grow to construct their own sense of masculine and feminine as they move through the implicit and explicit curriculum (Gilligan, 1986; Mandel & Shakeshaft, 1997). These form part of what Connell (1996) referred to as the gendered regime, which impacts on teaching and learning and ultimately, student

achievement. Perhaps because males occupy positions of power and prestige in society, boys are assumed to be more self-reliant than girls are. Nonetheless, studies consistently point to the underachievement of some boys.

The nurture versus nature discourse continues. Nothing is proven, and speculation runs rampant. Gurian (1996) theorized that boys are hard-wired for certain behaviours. He postulated that biologically, boys are more aggressive, more active, and less empathetic than girls are. Gurian stated that *"boys have three times more reading difficulties than girls"*, because *"the brain that will read better is the brain that can draw more heavily on both sides of the brain at once"* (p.114). Thorne's (1993) earlier research corroborated Gurian's findings. Thorne found boys were less verbal, less fluent, and less skilled at listening (1993).

Connell (1996) argued that there are multiple masculinities, some hegemonic and others marginalized. Unlike Gurian and Thorne, Connell found no consistencies in boys' attitudes and behaviours, only contradictions. While Pollock, in Real Boys (1998) believed that *"we can do a great deal to shape how a boy behaves"* (p.93), he argued that strategies and structures could be put into place to re-focus boys' energies and interests.

Kindlon and Thompson (2000) in Raising Cain, noted that North America has assigned relationship work to women and this has turned emotions into a non-valued language for men. *"As a result, most men have limited awareness or understanding of their feelings of others ... instead, they tend to fall back on what they have been taught to do with other men – namely, compete, control and criticize."* (p.5). The authors link the ability to exhibit impulse control, to ease with verbal expressions. *"Girls' verbal abilities, on average, mature faster than boys': they talk earlier and more fluently...boys tend to be more physically active than girls, moving faster and staying in motion longer."* (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000, p. 12). Kindlon and Thompson maintain that the lack of impulse control limits some males' fluency with language. They argue that teaching emotional literacy to boys may help with impulse control and language proficiency.

According to the U.S. Department of Education's surveys of fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades, girls consistently do more homework than boys. More boys are suspended than girls are and more boys are held back and drop out than girls (reported in Sommers, 2000). Girls appear more engaged in school. In Durham, 205 more girls than boys report receiving homework on a regular basis, and 30% fewer boys make the link between completing homework and doing well in school (Durham District School Board, 2001).

Achievement and participation data indicate that there is a wide range of achievement among boys. Gender is important, however, a variety of other factors compound or reduce the gendered impact. The more productive question is which boys are in trouble. Socio-economic factors play a critical role. The lower the socio-economic status of boys, the less likely they are to succeed. As income and status rise, the gendered differences in literacy are minimized. In Australia, upper-social-status boys out-perform lower-social-status girls (Queensland, 2002).

For school and school systems focused on improving student achievement, the messages from the literature on gendered achievement in reading and writing are both disturbing and confusing.

METHOD:

The Durham District School Board has approximately 70,000 students in 125 schools. Although the district performs in the top 15% of school districts on the provincial assessments, as indicated earlier, gendered results continue to exist (EQAO, 2001). As a district, we were curious about the perspectives of some of our male students on this issue. The main purpose of this study is to describe some of the attitudes of boys regarding issues involving reading and writing in classrooms, and on the provincial tests.

During the winter of the 2002-2003 school year, a series of semi-structured focus groups were conducted with boys in grades 4 and 6. We selected three schools in which boys performed well on the reading and writing components of the provincial grade three and six assessments, as well as three schools where the boys underperformed compared to their female counterparts. This included a mix of socio-economic demographics. There were six focus groups, one for each school. The focus group research complied with the ethical review protocols established by the district, including written student and parental permission. The boys, who were selected from grades four and seven, had recent experience with the provincial assessments, which were conducted in May 2002. The focus groups were limited to five volunteer students in each of the six schools for a total of thirty boys participating in the focus groups.

Questions were developed in advance, however the focus groups were conducted as conversations with a purpose (Kahn & Cannell, 1957; Kvale, 1996). There were opportunities to explore with male students their attitudes and their recommendations for classroom/school interventions. The focus groups lasted for approximately 45 minutes to an hour. The discussion involved the lived experiences of boys in the classroom.

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS:

What boys told us:

Vygotsky (1978) referred to reading and writing as ways of talking, thinking, living, and working on paper. As 'psychological tools', he felt that they aided in how we interact with and are interacted upon. The reading and writing choices in some ways reveals this process at work. "Books and other texts affect children's views of themselves including their view of gender identity" (Barrs, 2002).

When interviewed, all boys said that although they saw their mothers read, they seldom saw their fathers read. "Mom reads all the time." "My mom talks to her friends about books." "My father only read when he had an accident and he couldn't do anything else." There were 5% of boys who said their fathers did read books, but even they said it was not on a regular basis. "My father reads self-help books and then wants to talk to us

(younger sister) about them. It's boring." This becomes important when considering the impact of modeling on behavior. A further consideration is that fact that teachers, especially elementary teachers, are mainly female. Boys lack male role models who read. All boys said that boys don't read the same things as girls. The two most common topics they ascribed to girl readers, who were their peers, were animals and teen idols. They did acknowledge that girls read Harry Potter but felt this book was not the norm. "Everyone reads Harry Potter even girls."

All boys felt their teachers did not give enough choices for students to select novels and books. In schools where boys performed well on the provincial assessments, 70% said they enjoyed reading, whereas only 30% of boys in schools where boys under-performed, admitted to enjoying reading. This confirmed an earlier focus group session with 25 grade 4 boys, where 80% of boys said they rarely or never read at home. When we had probed further, the boys admitted they read manuals, magazines and information on the computer. Boys interviewed, associated reading with reading assigned novels 'for pleasure' as opposed to their actual reading 'for information'. They felt that library/ resource rooms were not user-friendly. They wanted more current selections for choice, but 70% admitted that their chief criterion for selecting a book from the school library was 'short'. Libraries with an intermediate selection for books were preferred over regular school libraries. Boys interviewed enjoyed read-alouds if they considered the books were interesting.

When given a choice of reading or doing another activity, 70% of the boys interviewed said they preferred another activity. Their choices included:

- Preferring physical activities
- Preferring to be outside
- Preferring to be on the computer

The grade four boys who liked to read talked about 'reading across the curriculum', which is a reasonably new concept in the Ontario curriculum. They talked in detail about the books they liked to read, including references to plot and character. Again these concepts have been re-emphasized in the curriculum. They admitted to reading before going to bed and staying up late with a good book. They rated Harry Potter highly. Several had attempted reading The Lord of the Rings series, and all had seen the movies. "I like adventures where the hero has to make tough choices." "I get lost in books about other worlds and forget the time. My teacher doesn't think these are real books."

The grade four boys who had not scored well did not see themselves as readers. "My dad doesn't read and I don't too." They saw themselves as slow readers, "it takes a long time to read, and I want to do other stuff like hockey", "what good is it?" They did not like the books that their teachers chose. "It's boring" or "It's girl stuff" were common responses. They choose books to read based on the cover or size of the book: "Short, I like short then I can do other stuff".

Grade seven boys who liked to read were enthusiastic and saw themselves as good readers, "I'm good at this". Unlike the grade fours, not all saw themselves as fast readers,

"I read slowly so I remember what I read", "I like to understand". They would re-read favourite books and also talked about "the flow of reading" and "getting lost in the book". 80% had a lot of new and current family books, and were read to as children. Picking out books were seen as a family activity. "That's what I remember the most, a bedtime story. I read Good Night Moon over and over." Unlike their peers who saw themselves as poor readers, they enjoyed read-alouds and the teacher's choices. They selected books by reading the first few pages, and preferred science fiction and fantasy books.

Grade seven boys who were poor readers found reading too passive an activity. "All you do is sit. What fun is that?" "It's boring." "Why read when you can have fun?" They preferred action/adventure books: "I like when guys get killed". Interestingly, 65% of these boys saw themselves as good readers, but they just didn't like it. These were boys who did not score highly on the provincial assessments. They reported that their home libraries contained childhood favourites but not a current selection. "We have me and my brother's books from when we were little."

Implications for Teachers

All students, and especially young males, expressed wanting more choice in what they read in school. Teachers could survey their classes for interest, and select a variety of texts including high interest and informational books. Boys wanted the inclusion of science fiction and high action in their read-alouds. Teachers can explore diverse ways of having students explore books, and not just rely on pencil and paper exercises. To provide role models and make reading more accessible, principals and teachers could share their reading selections with students, and capitalize on popular books and movies to engage reluctant readers.

DISTRICT RESPONSE:

In focus groups, we discovered that many of the books used in classrooms were not engaging the boys. Boys regarded reading as what they were given in school, and so this is why they did not choose to read at home. When they were initially queried, they answered that they rarely/did not read. In fact, they read, but for information and not for pleasure. They were reading magazines, comic books, manuals, and gaming instructions. Our findings were confirmed by the recent study of 400 grade 4, 6 and 8 Ohio readers, where boys saw themselves as less competent readers than girls (Peterson, 2000). If boys in general read less than girls, then they are simply getting less experience of written language and what Margaret Meek (1988) calls "the untaught lessons that texts teach - about reading as well as writing" (Barrs, 2002, p. 3).

Through the dedicated work of teacher-librarians, we began to gather high-interest reading resources for boys including informational text, magazines, science fiction and action fiction. Some schools encourage student input in book selection for whole-class literacy assignments. Others have piloted reading clubs for boys, so that they become more aware of books that would hold their interest. We have worked with teachers to

increase the integration of drama and simulations to allow boys and girls to explore feelings and emotions in a safe environment. We encouraged teachers to use read-alouds, and at all levels, to read to students a grade level or two above the class's ability.

The board also began to look at new approaches to teaching pre-reading and pre-writing skills. A multiple intelligence framework of teaching pre-reading and writing skills in Kindergarten through Grade 1, entitled Animated Literacy, is being implemented. The speech and language pathologists introduced this approach from California, and our Early Literacy Resource Teachers (ELRT's) play a key role in its implementation.

Some teachers are looking at giving boys more frequent breaks and more hands-on activities to sustain their interest. We also seek out males as good role models for reading since the information gathered in our focus groups concluded that a component to success for interested male readers is having an older brother or father who enjoys reading.

We use the Oshawa Generals, a Junior A hockey team, as advocates for literacy. We created posters with the Generals reading, so that boys could have a visual image they could relate too. In Even Hockey Players Read, Booth (2002) explores how schools can promote strategies so that literacy can have a powerful influence in boys' lives. We invite dads and community members into the schools. "Often linked has been the realization that talk, or speaking and listening, is the foundation of all literacy learning" (Barrs, 2002, p. 4). Talk can engage reluctant readers. We are encouraging more role-playing and simulations as a way to get at "feelings". Educators/authors David Booth and David Bouchard have modeled best practices for our teachers, administrators, and parents. We encourage business and the skilled trades, in our co-op and Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP) sessions, to share with students the importance of literacy to help make it 'real' for boys.

Technology appeals to boys. Boys like to read material on the internet and memorize detailed material about games. On our attitudinal surveys, they exhibit a greater confidence in their computer skills. We utilize computer-assisted learning such as IBM's Teaching and Learning with Computers (TLC) and Successmaker in our primary classrooms. We have made gender a topic in staff conversations.

For Durham, the issue is to pay attention to improving reading and writing skills for all students including some boys who struggle, but not at the expense of girls. We have different gendered interventions for girls, including Scientists in the Schools, piloting all-girls math and science classes, and mini-conferences for Grade 8 girls in partnership with the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO). That, however, is another story for another time.

CONCLUSION:

These academic and attitudinal findings give school districts pause to re-examine the strategies regarding gender and literacy initiatives. As Connell (1996) reminds us, the issue is not all boys, but rather the issue is to focus on those boys who are not succeeding.

The literature suggests that boys from lower socio-economic backgrounds, visible minorities and boys who are learning disabled are more likely to encounter difficulty with schooling in general, and reading and writing in particular (Sewell, 1998; Hey, Leonard, Daniels & Smith, 1998). ERO (2002) noted "Not all boys (or girls) conform to gender types. While more boys than girls experience failure at school, not all boys do" (p.6). The report highlighted the under-achievement of some boys, which for New Zealand meant boys from mainly lower-socio economic status, and Maori boys. In Canada, Statistics Canada reported in its Education Quarterly Review that over two-thirds of students receiving special education are boys (Statistics Canada, 2000).

Gendered results on high-stakes testing will require a thoughtful response from school districts. Additional research is required. Which boys are having difficulty and what are the likely sources of the trouble? The issue may be developmental or tied to learning styles. It may be that reading and writing are seen as "soft" subjects, not for real boys, unlike mathematics and science. It may be that modalities used to teach boys to read and write don't appear to engage their interest.

I offer a word of caution. Educators need to look critically at the different areas where boys and where girls are not well served by the school system (Connell, 1996). The solution is not as simple as taking resources away from girls who traditionally have received less than boys have. There is a danger that this focus on boys will reinforce literacy as a feminine endeavor. Nor should educators gear the curriculum more towards a male-centered learning environment, to the exclusion of girls. Care needs to be taken to balance the needs of boys and the needs of girls.

Accountability has interesting by-products. Time will tell whether the interventions have proven successful. More research is needed. That is, "Why Boys? Which Boys? Why Now?".

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